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ABSTRACT

A fifth-grade teacher researched the experts, observed master teachers, and experimented to find out what worked best for her and her students as she made the transition from the basal to the process approach to teaching the language arts. Taking courses and meeting with others helped support her decision to change. During the process of change, the teacher realized that the basal can be utilized in a whole language way, heavily supplemented with real books, self-selected reading of all types, and oral and written responses. Using the reading/writing process, the teacher tried to incorporate the literary genres her students were studying by integrating all the areas of the language arts. Portfolios were kept as students finished each genre. Developing the skills of cooperative learning enabled students to become listeners, supporters, and active learners. The teacher selected books based on the students' varied interests and abilities. When students chose the books they were about to read, they followed guidelines from the reading consultant. The teacher readily shared classroom experiences with parents, teachers, principals, board members, and others through frequent communication in newspaper form or invitations to visit the classroom. Performance assessments in language arts included: writing, oral discussions, exhibitions, and portfolios. The teacher constantly observed and evaluated herself and her students. The teacher observed the emergence of active readers, writers, listeners, and speakers--active involvement, active learners, and teacher and students as learners. (RS)

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Diane K. DeSantis

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Overview:

1. Transition from the basal to the process approach- why?/ how?
2. How we (teacher and students) find and select books
3. How we (teacher and students) assess what we're doing

PART 1: TRANSITION FROM THE BASAL TO THE PROCESS APPROACH

WHY?

As I began to understand guidelines necessary for optimal learning and how learners learn, my classroom focus encouraged:

1. striving for meaning while reading and writing
2. students as teachers- to explain, present, share, and confer with each other, for- whoever explains, learns
3. students to set their own goals for reading and writing by their asking questions, making predictions, focusing, and reviewing
4. reading and writing of many texts
5. students to be aware of whether they were understanding and achieving their goals.

HOW?

I researched the experts and observed master teachers and students. I experimented and found out what worked best for me and for my students and adopted the process that fit our needs, such as a classroom with a quiet atmosphere and revised structure and organization. To accomplish this, I created organizational tools, i.e., reading and writing contracts, story maps, and editing forms. We read, watched, listened, tried, and learned from each other.

Taking courses and meeting with others helped support my decision to change. The first turning point was a result of the course, "Integrating Reading and Language Arts". I had been using the traditional approach at that point. My project for the course was "Emerging Writers and Readers", with an emphasis on the writing process. I continued with an internship the following semester, "The Process Approach in Language Arts", and my emphasis grew to

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include both writing and reading process. By that spring, my classroom language arts block was converted from using the basal with all its extras, to reading, writing, listening, and speaking with students choosing their own books to read and writing stories based on their interests. The following school year, I began my graduate project, "The Process Approach Across the Curriculum". During this time, I researched books, professional journal articles, interviewed experts, and observed different teachers. This is not something I do quickly. It required a great deal of observing, reading, selecting, and communicating with parents and others.

What helped and what didn't help? Other intermediate teachers at my school were not using the reading/writing process approach to language arts. They were supportive in terms of letting me do "my own thing". Others who were supportive included a professor from Keene State College, Keene, New Hampshire, our school's reading consultant, our principal, and other members of the classes I took at Keene State College. I needed some kind of support system for this, to talk with about what worked and what didn't work for me.

A word about the basal textbooks: during this growing process I realized that the basal text is material that may be used as a resource. Many teachers do not have the option of giving up basal textbooks. The basal can be utilized in a whole language way, heavily supplemented with real books, self-selected reading of all types, and oral and written responses.

Using the reading/writing process, I try to incorporate the genres we are studying by integrating all the areas of language arts. For example, we started last school year with students choosing their own adventure books. I read to them My Side of the Mountain, and we did activities similar to the ones in the book. Students wrote an adventure story. We wrote a class adventure together. We discovered that students' reading comprehension and their writing skills were more developed. Next students read mysteries. We had several lessons on fingerprinting, elements of a mystery, and we worked on a class mystery. Several parents, other teachers, and our principal read their favorite mysteries to us. Students chose a mystery book to read, and they wrote mystery stories. Students also wrote an information book on animals, after studying animals in science. Using their information, some students wrote a fiction story with facts included from the animal unit.

Portfolios were kept as students finished each genre. For example, Portfolio #1 contained all the work done during the process of writing their adventure story. That included: brainstorming, webbing, sloppy copy, skip line/margin, corrections, practice book, printed copy, and final copy. Portfolio #2 contained all work done during the process of writing their mystery story. Portfolio #3 contained their animal information book.

Although cooperative learning group were integrated last year into my classroom, I used this much more this year. Students were in small groups- the smaller the better for group activities. Most of the class were in groups of three. As the new quarter came and topic studies changed, students were assigned to new groups, working together for several weeks for various activities. I started off with bonding exercises. These included: discussing of uncommon commonalities and the sharing of these, naming of the group, developing a logo, handshake, and song, and designing a sign that represented the group. Developing the skills of cooperative learning enabled students to become listeners, supporters, and active learners.

PART 2: HOW THE STUDENTS AND I CHOOSE BOOKS

I selected books based on the students' varied interests and abilities. Students needed to enjoy the books so they were motivated to learn from them. I consulted our reading specialist for her ideas. I used Arrow and Trumpet book clubs for teacher and award recommended books, and catalogs that were available from our reading consultant. I had the money previously used for workbooks to purchase books.

When students chose the books they were about to read, they followed guidelines from our reading consultant. She visited our class early in the year, and she gave us advice on how individuals could select books. She suggested checking the book out as you would in a book store- title, author, back cover, number of chapters, print size, chapter titles, etc., and she suggested that students use the five finger test (counting to make sure there weren't a lot more than five unfamiliar words on a typical page). We made a poster of what she said, and displayed it for the rest of the school year to remind students about the guidelines. Students were allowed to repick after two chapters if the selection didn't suit them, but they couldn't

choose a third time until they had completed one of the first two books they had picked.

I readily shared classroom experiences through frequent communication in newspaper form or invitations to visit our classroom- with parents, teachers, principals, board members and others. I wanted to be innovative whenever possible, and I tried to be as actively involved in reading and writing as the students. I truly enjoyed a classroom of kids who were excited about learning.

PART 3: HOW THE STUDENTS AND I ASSESS WHAT WE ARE DOING

I taught kids to teach, clarify, explain, and summarize about the books they read and wrote. They wrote letters about their books. Students taught mini lessons. This was measuring real-life performance. The performance assessments in language arts included: writing, oral discussion, exhibitions (demonstrations or performances), and portfolios (collections of students' works assembled over time). Students responded in journals, participated in peer and teacher conferences, taught mini lessons, shared their writings, exhibited their works, and compiled portfolios. Students' works- papers, projects, and videotaped examples- showed their progress. I began to put more emphasis on measuring real-life performance, and I developed future instruction to that end.

Since some teachers continued using the basal textbooks at our school, I also assessed each student during the month with our basal's assessments. I compared these with my weekly assessment checklist for follow-up.

CONCLUSION:

This was a process for both the students and me, and I found as I tried each new thing along the process of transition, meaningful change was possible. I constantly observed and evaluated myself and my students. I've learned I'll always be a student along with my students. The exciting part was that I saw active readers, writers, listeners, and speakers emerging- active involvement- active learners- teachers and students as learners.